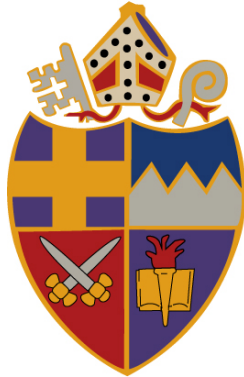


ONLINE SAFE CHURCH: POLICIES & RECOMMENDATIONS



Preface

The Episcopal Church added online safe church policies to their Safeguarding policies prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. After the pandemic began, The Diocese of Southwestern Virginia also released additional guidance and recommended best practices to keep children, youth, and adults safe when they are online for worship or other gatherings. This document is an all-in-one resource containing official policies and recommended best practices. Here is what is include.

- (1) Online Safeguarding policies of the Diocese of Southwestern VA
- (2) Best Practices for Live Streaming or Posting Recordings of Worship with Children and Youth
- (3) Creating Safe Church Online: Recommended Safe Church Guidelines for Online Meeting Spaces & Worship

If you have any questions about these policies, you can contact Pattie Ames, Canon for Christian Formation at pames@dioswva.org, or Rev. Mark Furlow, Canon to the Ordinary & Chief Operating Officer, at mfurlow@dioswva.org.

Appendix B: Recommended Practices and Guidelines for Social Media and Electronic Communications for Children and Youth

Social media shapes the lives of young people and has the potential to empower ministry. Behavior in the digital sphere is never private. Posted content may be used out of context and out of the control of the originating individuals and organizations, putting them at risk. In addition, these powerfully connective tools are subject to the same dynamic of unequal power and potential for abuse that present a risk in all ministry relationships. Churches face the challenge of identifying and proactively addressing areas of potential risk in social media use in the midst of rapidly evolving technology. The following recommended practices and guidelines are designed to be a flexible template for developing policies and covenants governing the safe use of social media and digital communication in ministry settings.

General Information about Digital Communications

- All communications sent digitally (email, social networking sites or platforms, notes, texts, or posts, etc.) are NOT CONFIDENTIAL and can be shared or reposted to others.
- Interactions in the virtual world need to be transparent; that is, occurring in such a way that it is easy for others to see what actions are performed.
- In the virtual world, healthy boundaries and safe church practices must be adhered to as they are in the physical world.
- In the virtual world, “friend” can mean anyone with whom you are willing to communicate through that medium. In the physical world, friend can mean much more in terms of intimacy, self-disclosure, mutuality, and expectations for relationship.
- Laws regarding mandated reporting of suspected abuse, neglect, or exploitation of children or youth apply in the virtual world as they do in the physical world. Check your local applicable laws.

Recommended Practices and Guidelines for Churches and Organizations:

- Establish a policy that outlines professional and institutional standards for profiles and interactions on social networking sites and platforms.
- Establish a policy of transparency regarding social media accounts. The best practice is to have the diocese, congregation, or organization create and “own” the social media accounts representing the diocese, congregation, or organization respectively and have multiple administrators and/or supervisors with access. If personal accounts are used, a system of monitoring should be established.

- Establish a policy regarding the identification or “tagging” of individuals in online photos or videos. For example, on Facebook, “tagging” someone in a photo or video creates a hyperlink to that person’s profile page that can be clicked by anyone. The best practice is for the diocese, congregation, or organization not to identify or “tag” individuals. The “tagging” of children and youth should be prohibited. When written permission is provided by a parent/guardian, the captioning of photos or videos of minors may be permitted. The caption should not include the minor’s full name, nor should it create a clickable link to someone’s personal profile. A policy of whether or not an individual can “self-tag” in a diocese, congregation, or organization’s online photo or video should also be established.
- A diocese, congregation, or organization does not have a responsibility to review or monitor the personal pages or groups that are not sponsored by that diocese, congregation, or organization, except as described in #2 above. The preceding statement should be included in the diocese, congregation, or organization’s Social Media Policy.
- Email can be a good method of communication, and it also has the opportunity to be misunderstood. Having a clear understanding and procedure for responding to digital communication that raises concern is prudent for all. Best practices can include not responding immediately and sharing the communication with a supervisor before responding. Phone and face-to-face meetings are preferred when responding to emotionally driven communications or pastoral emergencies.
- When using photos and videos for ministry purposes, obtain a media release for each person and only post images that respect the dignity of every person depicted.
- Dioceses, congregations, or organizations must inform participants when they are being videoed because church buildings are not considered public space. Signs should be posted that indicate a service or activity will be broadcast when worship services or activities are streamed or distributed on the web or via other broadcast media.

Recommended Practices and Guidelines for Interactions with Children and Youth:

- Prudent judgement should be used in the time of day a child or youth is contacted through social media. Under normal circumstances, refrain from contact or exchanging texts, chats, or emails before 8:00 am or after 10:00 pm, unless it’s an emergency.
- Privacy settings and personal boundaries should be implemented.
 - Create and use profiles on social networking sites that meet professional and institutional standards.
 - Do not submit connection requests (such as friend requests on Facebook or “Add Me” on Snapchat) to children or youth for personal interactions. Youth may not be able to decline such requests due to the disparity of power between youth and adults. Youth may ask to be “friends,” and adults should

discern the nature of contact appropriate for healthy ministry.

- Apply privacy settings that are consistent with all children and youth, across all social networking sites and platforms. Avoid playing favorites or the appearance of playing favorites.
- Establish a regular ongoing and consistent system of review that focuses on settings, accessible content, photos, and videos to ensure compliance with professional and institutional standards.
- Inform parents of children and youth of social networking sites and platforms used within the ministry.
- When possible, send communication (1) to entire groups, (2) on an individual's "wall," or (3) in public areas, rather than in private messages. This includes photos, images and videos.
- When sending emails to a child or youth that contain personal or private information regarding that child or youth, a copy should be sent to the parents or guardians as well. Examples of these types of emails include: payment due information, specific medical requests or questions, etc. Mass emails sent to an entire group are not required to be copied to parents or guardians.
- Disclose **ongoing** digital pastoral communications (ie: e-mails, Facebook messages, texting, etc) with children and youth to a parent and/or a supervisor to determine when a referral to a professional provider or resource is needed.
- Create covenants to govern digital groups, which include:
 - Appropriate and inappropriate behavior of members (bullying, pictures that depict abuse, violence, illegal activities, sexual acts, etc.) and the consequence for inappropriate behavior;
 - Who may join and/or view group activity, when participants should leave the group and when/if the group will be disbanded;
 - Description of content that can be posted or published on the site or page;
 - A prohibition of "tagging" photos and videos of children and youth. However, the captioning of photos and videos is permissible with written permission from a parent or guardian;
 - Notification that mandatory reporting laws will be followed; and
 - Consequences for breaking the covenant.
- Delete inappropriate material posted in digital groups, address the behavior and report it, if necessary, in accordance with legal and institutional requirements.

Best Practices for Live Streaming or Posting Recordings of Worship with Children and Youth

Recommended by Canon Pattie Ames

Last Revised: May 11, 2021

Worship is a public event, whether in person or online, with that in mind there are some safety measures to take as parishes livestream or post recording or worship -

Let people know the service is being live streamed or recorded (written material prior to regathering, announcement before service, on front of the bulletin)

Consider camera positions when installing

Have a specific area designated that will not be in the line of the camera at any time during the service for people to sit during worship

During the distribution of communion, go to a slide or show a stained-glass window or some other focal point

Do not tag children or youth on Facebook and do not list names of minors in the bulletin

Say only first names only in prayers (all people)

Do not have people wear nametags in worship or nametags with first names only

Parents of children and youth should sign a photo/video release consent, this helps as a one-time consent for use of their likeness and as a reminder of the live streaming and posting of worship

Let children, youth and parents know they and their child(ren) maybe on camera as a chorister, acolyte or lector during the service

Creating Safe Church Online

Last Revised: May 11, 2021

Recommended Safe Church Guidelines for Utilizing Online Meeting Spaces and Worship

- Maintain the 'Rule of Three'. Make sure to never be alone in a chat room with a parishioner, particularly minors. Have your hosts (two unrelated, trained adults) log in a few minutes before the scheduled time.
- Don't post links to meetings on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or other public places online. Send them in emails or texts. Don't invite people you don't know into a private space with youth and children.
- For meeting with anyone (adults and/or minors): the host can mute, turn off video, or remove participants from the call.
- We suggest, if possible, that whoever is spiritually leading the meeting is NOT set as the host, so they can focus on their ministry. Ask another trusted leader to be the host of the meeting to run a ministry of boundaries.
- Don't post screenshots of meetings online without permission of everyone in the photo. If possible, remove names from the photo before posting.
- Do not share screenshots of minors without permission from their guardian.

For Zoom meetings specifically, go into your settings and make the following changes:

- Turn off "Join before host"
- Turn off private chat
- Auto save all chat history (please note that all chats, whether private or everyone are recorded in the downloadable meeting minutes)
- Turn off file transfer
- Turn off screen sharing for participants
- Turn off the whiteboard. Or at turn on auto save if you're using it for the lesson/ game.
- Turn off auto approve for re-entry into the meeting for participants who have been removed by a meeting host.

Enable one of the Zoom safety features to avoid "ZOOM-Bombing" in a meeting or gathering:

- Require a meeting password
- Require meeting registration
- Enable the waiting room feature
- Lock Meeting after participants join

In addition to sending the ZOOM link for participants it is suggested that explain some of the ground rules for appropriate ZOOM meeting behavior and additional information that

may be pertinent to a particular meeting or setting. (ex. Pastoral meeting with clergy and staff might utilize language that says “Please find a place where you will be alone and where others may not hear what is being discussed. Please use headphones or earbuds to lessen the opportunity for others to hear confidential information”).

YouTube & Facebook Live

- On both platforms during worship experiences or online classes, you can disable or turn off commenting. Many parishes have been using this as a way to engage or receive prayer requests while live. If a parish elects to do this, a dedicated person should be monitoring the comments as they come in and delete any inappropriate posts.
- Individuals who post inappropriate comments on either platform can be blocked from doing so.

YouTube:

- [How to adjust comment settings](#)
- [How to block a commenter](#)
- [How to report inappropriate or spam comments](#)

Facebook:

- [How to turn off comments in Facebook live](#)
- [How to ban someone from a Facebook page](#)

As with any new and evolving ministry, there will be a time of adjustment as we learn more about how these things work and what the best practices are. Please contact [Pattie Ames](#) or [Jenni Faires](#).

Originally developed by Emily Gowdy Canady, Program Officer for Youth, Young Adult and College Campus Ministries in the Diocese of East Carolina, this document has been revised with permission by the staff of the Diocese of Southwestern Virginia for the purposes of supporting Safe Church Online in Southwestern Virginia.